

# CHIMERA

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"And what rough beast its hour come round at last . . ."—William Butler Yeats

## CHIMERA A LITERARY QUARTERLY

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### Contents



At the Seashore: <i>Ruth Herschberger</i>	2
The Birth of a Myth: <i>Arthur Koestler</i>	3
In Memoriam: R. H. P.: <i>Jacques Barzun</i>	22
Three Poems: <i>Robert Pitney</i>	24
Compassionata at Hyde Park Corner: <i>Sybille Bedford</i>	28
Paul Claudel: <i>Henri Peyre</i>	35
Lynx: <i>R. A. D. Ford</i>	46
Wallace Fowlie: <i>Clowns and Angels: Henry Miller</i>	47
About the Contributors	48

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# At the Seashore

*by Ruth Herschberger*



Let the riddle speak. With the soft unction of sea-  
Grass, and the dapple of the sand-piping birds,  
Let the bright pockets of the sand be heard,  
The riddle speak, and the sea softly agree.

This is a wintry world. Conundrums flow  
Down the swift dunes to the pearl-blue sea;  
Let the puzzle play, with its bucket gray-green,  
And its sharp red paddle, its desert hoe.

Set the child to dig, and mention no goal,  
Let the child uproot the sand inert,  
Firm in the hour-grain, shovel assert  
His stubborn assault on the turtled shoal.

Till soft, the quick hole where the sand slips dense,  
The dry and the arid, the ant-lived pit,  
Up flow the swift waters to where he sits,  
Kingly created, atop his dry fence.

And the gathering dusk with its gathering shade  
Is folded in promise and laved with seed;  
Each ripple of sea is a fine new weed,  
Capped with a riddle-wise, shadow-blade.

O girdling desert, you've sprouted life.  
The child's bird-eye and his little wing  
Is gay with the knowledge, and up he springs,  
Content that the sand fast fills the hive.

# The Birth of a Myth\*

IN MEMORY OF RICHARD HILLARY

*by Arthur Koestler*



## I

WRITING about a dead friend is writing against time, a chase after a receding image: catch him, hold him, before he becomes petrified into a myth. For the dead are arrogant; it is as hard to be at ease with them as with someone who has served with you in the ranks after he has received his commission. Their perverse silence has a numbing effect: you have lost the race before it started, you will never get hold of him as he was. Already the fatal, legend-forming mechanism is at work: those pleasant trifles are freezing into Biographical Anecdotes, and weightless episodes hang like stalactites in the caves of your memory.

In times of war the dead recede quicker and myths form faster; already there is one growing around Hillary and it is easy to foresee that it will wax and expand, until his name has become one of the symbolic names of this war. The growth of a myth cannot be influenced and one should not attempt it. For myths grow like crystals: there is some diffuse emotion latent in the social medium which strives for expression as the molecules in a saturated solution strive to form a coherent pattern; and as soon as a suitable core is found, they group themselves around it and the

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\* This essay, reprinted here with the permission of the author, was originally published in the English literary magazine *Horizon* (April, 1943).

crystal is formed, the myth is born. The question, of course, is what makes a suitable core. Obviously it must have some affinity with that vague, diffuse sentiment, that craving for the right type of hero to turn into a myth; obviously he must express something which is the unconscious content of that craving. Now Hillary's life and death was in a way symbolic and he knew it—but a symbol for precisely what? That is what he could not, and would have so much liked to know:

'... I am writing this<sup>1</sup> just before going to bed and I feel a little sick, for I have learned today that Colin Pinckney has been killed in Singapore. You do not know him, but you will, and I hope, like him, when you read the book. His death makes an apt postscript and it raises in my mind yet again the question which I have put in the book and attempted to answer, of what is the responsibility of the man who is left. I say man and not men, for I am now the last. It is odd that I who always gave least should be the one who remained. Why, I wonder. . . .'

What kind of responsibility was this that fell to him? What was the symbol he stood for? A myth may grow and appeal to us, may make us respond like tuning-forks to the vibration of the right chord—and yet we may not know why; we may sense the symbol without having deciphered it. After all it took over two thousand years until somebody explained to us why the myth of Oedipus Rex makes us hold our breath.

In the last two years of his twenty-three, Hillary was much concerned to find that answer, to analyse the core of the legend which he felt closing in around him. He knew he was going to die, and he wanted to find out why. In fact he had deliberately chosen a course of which he knew that it could not end otherwise but by his death:

'... You ask me to have faith darling.<sup>2</sup> Yes, but faith in what? "That things will be all right," you say. Depends what you mean by all right. If you mean faith that some miracle will happen and that I shall be ordered to do some job which I could not only do well, but enjoy, then I say No: it is bad to have that faith and very undermining. If you mean faith that I have done the right thing in coming back,<sup>3</sup> then Yes. But if you mean faith that I shall survive, why then again No. If this thing plays to its logical conclusion there is no reason why I should survive. After a few hours' flying my instinct will tell me that I shall survive, while my reason will tell me that I shall not—and this time reason will be all right.'

And again:

'...<sup>4</sup>As before, the more I fly the more my instinct will tell me that I shall get through, while my reason telling me that I shall not, will grow fainter.

'But this time my reason will be right. I know too much not to doubt it.'

Now this is rather odd, isn't it? For normally it is our instinct which warns and scares us, and reasoning which reassures us. With him it is the other way round. But there is something even odder to come. We have seen how treacherous this instinct was. He knew it and repeatedly emphasized it; e.g. '... already the potion is beginning to work. My walk as I enter the Mess is jaunty,' etc. And yet he takes the fatal decision to return to flying, deliberately following his instinct and against his reason. A few days after his arrival at the station he writes:

'One can rationalize for ever and one's reason finally tells one that it is madness, but it is one's instinct to which one listens. . . .'<sup>5</sup>

And in another letter:

'This is indeed a queer place for journey's end.'<sup>6</sup>

Thus he distrusts his 'instinct' when it tells him that he shall survive; but trusts it when it pushes him to his journey's end. Who cheats here whom? Apparently the 'instinct' cheats its victim: it lures him into the death trap with the mirage of his jaunty invulnerability. But at closer view we find that the victim lets himself be led into the trap with open eyes, and even with his tongue in his cheek:

'I feel like the Hollywood gangster hero, who voluntarily walking back into gaol, hears the prison gates clang behind him for the last time. . . .'<sup>7</sup>

That strange and suspect 'instinct' whose sentence he accepts and whose consolations he discards—resentfully, wistfully, arguing, grimacing and even 'weeping as a child,' but finally submitting in humbleness and acceptance—that 'instinct' now appears to us as a very strange force indeed. We have no scientific term as yet to name it; but it seems oddly akin to that other force which makes the core the captive of the crystal, closing in around it to fulfil its predestined pattern.

## II

We see here indeed with almost clinical precision how the myth invades and destroys its chosen object. We see in his letters as under a microscope how the hero-craving, symbol-eager expectations of his Time creep like microbes under his skin, penetrate the blood-stream and burn him out, in order to preserve the symbolic shell.

But all this does not answer our question: a symbol for what? After all, Pat Finucane shot down thirty-two and he only five (with three probables). He wasn't even given a medal. And *The Last Enemy*,\* the most promising book that came out of his generation, was promise and not fulfillment. What was it then—what attitude, idea, state of mind, latent hope did he expresss? Young Hillary himself would have given anything to know, but he was not allowed to. It would have been against the rules of the game; for in these dim realms the right thing has always to be done for the wrong reasons. All he knew was that 'his instinct was right about this thing',<sup>8</sup> and with the writer's passion to formulate he made one attempt after another to explain why it was right. He could not succeed, for had he succeeded the 'instinct' would have died and he survived. As it was, he had to die in search of his own epitaph.

The first he proposed for himself were four lines from Verlaine:

Quoique sans patrie et sans roi  
Et très brave ne l'étant guère,  
J'ai voulu mourir à la guerre.  
La mort n'a pas voulu de moi.

But that was still in his early period, a hang-over from adolescence, the nihilistic post-puberty pose. It is written in retrospect and closes the first chapter of *The Last Enemy*. Then comes the turning point: 'I see they got you too'; the 'lifting of the veil on possibilities of thought so far beyond the grasp of the human mind.' And in the last chapter the epitaph has changed:

"Le sentiment d'être tout et l'évidence de n'être rien." That was me.'

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\* Published in this country as *Falling Through Space*, (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942).

In that last chapter the dazzling facility of the previous parts of the book turns into almost helpless stammering. But once the crisis is over—that inevitable process of breaking up and reforming of the personality—he sets out again to discover what he stands for:

'It was with some hesitation that I sat down to write the book, for I felt that when someone finally pointed out that the impact of this war was something more than a series of movie climaxes on the youth of the country, that it had some mental impact, the thing should be done well and worthy of the subject. Whether I succeeded I don't know. Finally I got so sick of the sop about our "Island Fortress" and "The Knights of the Air" that I determined to write it anyway in the hope that the next generation might realize that while stupid, we were not that stupid, that we could remember only too well that all this has been seen in the last war, but that in spite of that and not because of it, we still thought this one worth fighting.'<sup>9</sup>

It isn't much of an explanation, except for one turn of phrase. 'In spite of that and not because of it . . . ?'—that somehow sets the tuning forks in us into faint vibration; for we all more or less feel that we fight this war rather *in spite of* than *because of* something. The big words and slogans rather embarrass us, we don't like to be taken for quite as naive as that. This tongue-in-the-cheek patriotism, the attitude of the sceptic knight, the heretic crusader, is as typical for the mental climate of this war as the stoning of the dachshunds for the last; and we get a hint of the quality of the forces which select this specific type of hero for their purpose. But it is merely a hint, not more. It is somewhat elaborated in another letter, written after the torture of one of those monotonously repeated operations by which they re-made his face patch by patch until, as on a used coat, there were more patches than original tissue on it, and is dated:

'In Hospital,

'In bed,

'In anger.

' . . . Humanity is irony from the neck up. I guess that's the first thing you've got to realize if you want to fight for it. You'll get nothing out of it, and if you don't find virtue being its own reward sufficient, you have to be human enough to be amused by it, otherwise God help you.'<sup>10</sup>

Six weeks later, after another operation—this time it is a new arm splint for his hands—he tries to formulate that same elusive craving from another angle:

'What is the particular quality of the Air Force? I find it hard to analyse. I suppose it . . . has something which sets its members very distinctly apart from the other services. To say that it is an ethereal quality is both whimsical and untrue, yet I can think of no better word. It is something, some knowledge, not understood if you like, which can only be born of the combined humility and supreme self confidence which every combat pilot feels. Perhaps in the end it is this. Any human being lies closer to the unseen than any organization, but as an organization the Air Force leaves more scope for the human being as such than any other. And yet if they do feel this thing, is must be unconsciously, for they are strangely disappointing—like one of Mr. Morgan's novels—the theme is sublime, but in the attainment of it something is lacking. Will the time come in the days of peace, as Mr. Harrison asks, "when they will conquer something more than fear"? . . .'<sup>11</sup>

How jealously he guards the integrity of his scepticism! He sets it like a watch-dog before his door-step. It barked all the time—furiously, excitedly, amusingly. But it didn't bite, and behind it the door was open, the house without defence.

Five months later the 'instinct' had its way and he was back at flying—although his hands, which looked like bird-claws and held knife and fork like chop-sticks, had not the strength to work the brake of the heavy twin-engined craft on which he was trained; they had to fit an extension to the brake lever.<sup>12</sup> He couldn't release the under-carriage either—he had to take up somebody to do it for him.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes he could not fix the straps and flew unstrapped ('. . . by now I really don't care. If we do a crash landing, we do a crash landing. If I go through the wind-screen, I go through the windscreen'<sup>14</sup>); sometimes his damaged eyes, fitted with artificial eyelids, misread the altimeter.<sup>15</sup> He suffered from splitting headaches, the altitude made him sick,<sup>16</sup> the struggle of taxiing the heavy engine in a gale took the skin off his burned hands.<sup>17</sup> Somehow he succeeded in fooling the medical board, but not to fool himself. His last night-training-flights were a chain of close escapes; and sooner or later the chain had to break.

But why then, in God's name, did he go back?

Was it vanity? 'I wonder if that is true of me, or whether, as some silly girl said, I am going back purely out of vanity. I think not; because implicit in my decision was the acceptance of the

fact that I shall not come through.' You can be clever and twist this around and say that the quotation does not disprove the charge, *qui s'excuse s'accuse*, and so on. Granted; but then you have to find a more illuminating name for an urge which accepts destruction to get satisfied. Narcissus did not burn himself alive to preserve his image in the stream.

Urge of self-destruction, masochism, morbidity? . . . 'My darling, I am like a man, who, travelling through a dark tunnel and seeing a pinpoint of light ahead, has shouted for joy, then hesitated, stricken for fear it may be a mirage. Reassured, he presses forward, silent, his heart hammering, and it is only when he stumbles out into the light that he relaxes and, weeping for joy, pours out his heart. Richard'.<sup>18</sup> A boy who writes this kind of love-letter does not seem a morbid masochist. But again one may argue that the one does not exclude the other, *les extremes se touchent*, etc.; and again granted.

Fanatical devotion to a cause? . . . I could not immediately disabuse my sympathisers of their misplaced pity without appearing mock-modest or slightly insane. And so I remained an impostor. They would say, "I hope someone got the swine who got you: how you must hate those devils!" and I would say weakly, "Oh, I don't know," and leave it at that. I could not explain that I had not been injured in their war, that no thoughts of "our island fortress" or of "making the world safe for democracy" had bolstered me up when going into combat. I could not explain that what I had suffered I in no way regretted; that I welcomed it; and that now that it was over I was in a sense grateful for it and certain that in time it would help me along the road of my own private development'.<sup>19</sup> But perhaps this too is just modesty after all, or inverted pride; the young Englishman's love to overstate his understatement.

Thus we can go on being clever and analytical, and stick labels on our victim until he looks like a globetrotter's cabin trunk. There will always be a certain amount of truth in these kinds of statements, they fit in a loose way everybody, like shilling horoscopes; and if one of our clinical adjectives does not fit directly,

we can always turn it round by putting a minus sign before it and call it over-compensation or ‘the revenge of the repressed.’ We are, of course, fond of our little adjectives, they save us from pathos and embarrassment, from the threat of having to face the tragic implication. We prefer to let our lights shine like candles under the stars. But once they have burned down we are back from where we started, under a sky too large for us. Our adjectives fade, the labels peel off, only the subject remains, alone under the stars, faced with that nameless force which is set to destroy him. We watch the struggle, his reason against his fate, the man against the myth; and the myth devours the man.

‘I shall go back, I think. I can rationalize no further. I must let instinct decide. Maybe it is for this that I have withdrawn into myself. I don’t know. I can make nothing of this letter. (You perhaps will.) And yet in some way it seems an explanation. . . . It is those circles of peace again. They must return—they must. . . .’<sup>20</sup>

How he struggles in the net! To escape, to live; after all, one is only twenty-two—

‘Do not, darling, I beseech you, pucker your lovely brows at this levity for it is not what it seems; but cloaking lightly the agitated palpitations of a bewildered heart. . . .

‘Were I Mr. Beverley Nichols, had I any suède shoes, and were there any daffodils, I would now trip lightly outside and prance among them for the sheer joy of living. Thwarted by all three factors, I will content myself with a stoop of port in the mess, a slightly smug expression being the only visible sign that inwardly I am hugging myself with joyful anticipation. . . .’<sup>21</sup>

—After all, one is only twenty-two and one still has the undrawn cheque for about twice as many years in one’s pocket. But there is no escape, and he feels it; so he goes on trying at least to name the nameless force which destroys him. We have followed his various attempts from that first ‘Quoique sans patrie et sans roi’ to that final ‘I can rationalize no further. I must let instinct decide.’ Yet once the decision is taken he once more tries, *post festum*, to rationalize it. This last attempt to decipher the oracle dominates his letters in the last few weeks before he is killed:

‘Funny about your instinct about Kennington. Had I not stayed with him I should not have read “The Mint” and had I not read it I should not have come back (perhaps).’<sup>22</sup>

The meaning of this becomes clear from the following passage, written one week later:

'When I was still waffling I read "The Mint," T. E. Lawrence's unpublished agony in the Air Force, describing his first period at Uxbridge as an Air Force A.C.z. This, I confess, influenced me strongly, as it was what I was looking for. He found amongst those airmen and the ordinary things he shared with them, the petty tyrannies, etc., some kind of fellowship and happiness which before had been denied him.

'As much as anything I came back for that, and yet . . .'<sup>23</sup>

So that is what he came back for: fellowship and happiness. It is a long way from 'Humanity is irony from the neck up,' written seven months ago; those who die young, walk fast. But this is not the last station either. There is a strange irony behind this last attempt to explain the motives of his return, for the letter goes on as follows:

' . . . and yet it is difficult to reorientate oneself to three years ago. The young pilots are still the same and yet not the same—less fine somehow. I am outside still. . . . I look up sometimes in an armament lecture and expect to see Noel Agazarian sitting beside me, instead there is some pimply youth picking his nose. . . .'

And earlier in the same letter:

'Wretched I am that this station should be so utterly cold and bare, not only of trees and houses, but of all human contact. . . . My first two nights I crept back to my hut and wept like a child, much to my own surprise, as I thought I had steeled myself for this. . . .'

Even Lawrence, who had such a decisive influence on him, lets him down. The first book he discovers, the day after his arrival, in the station library is Lawrence's Letters, edited by David Garnett; this appears to him fraught with a curious significance: 'I took the book out and, believe it or not, opened it at this page'<sup>24</sup> . . . ? He then quotes Garnett's comment on Lawrence's desire to go back to the R.A.F.:

'One wonders whether his will had not become greater than his intelligence. The courage of the boy too proud to make a fuss is something we admire; in an educated man it is ridiculous and a sign of abnormality.'

This judgment on Lawrence he applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to himself; it is a devaluation, a terrible debunking of his motives, of the search for 'fellowship and happiness.' He does not cease complaining about his disappointment and loneliness:

'Perhaps it is merely the fear of being so much alone—a bitter pill when I always thought I liked it so much. But the total lack of human contact is awful—they are machines, not men. At Fighter Command they were people. One could talk to them and like them. . . . I love you so very much that at moments I think my heart will break. You are everything that is not here—warmth, humanity, humour and intelligence.'<sup>25</sup>

There are, of course, moments of exhilaration, as when the younger pilots congratulate him on his first solo-flight in a twin-engined plane:

'. . . So they are human after all. I feel a new-old warmth begin to course through me; the potion is already at work.'

'I pick up a newspaper—Beveridge Report? Oh the fellow is thinking about after the war—what do we care about after the war; we'll be dead anyway. Let's find out what Jane's doing in the *Daily Mirror*. We turn to the page, we comment on her legs, and I look closely at the faces around me, and what I see pleases me. I am happy.'

'We wander in to dinner and afterwards we crowd round the fire, order beers, more beers, and talk shop. Time passes. Am I bored? A little, but only a very little, for tomorrow I shall be up again.'<sup>26</sup>

But these moments of fellowship and happiness are short, and of a somewhat hectic, artificial character; then the solitude closes in once more on him. His days are now counted; he has but ten more left to live:

'I ponder K.'s theory that *l'espérance de la fraternité* is always a wild goose chase unless one is tight or physically exhausted in a crowd—as after long marches.'

'Tonight I am almost convinced he is right. But he must not be—for it was for that reason that I returned.'<sup>27</sup>

Ten days more and the wild goose chase is over. But is it true that he returned for that—*l'espérance de la fraternité*? And fraternity with whom? Behind the pimpled youth there is the image of Noel Agazarian, of Peter Pease and Colin Pinckney and the others, of whom he alone survived, 'the last of the long-haired boys,' the flying undergraduates of the Battle of Britain. The young pilots at the station are 'somehow not the same'—at twenty-three he feels like an anachronism, a survivor from another generation. One after the other they had been killed; there is a sentence which runs like a monotonous row of tombstones through his book: From this flight Broody Benson did not return. From this flight Bubble Waterston did not return. From this flight

Larry Cunningham did not return. 'Each time they climbed into their machines and took off to combat, they were paying instinctive tribute to their comrades who were dead.'<sup>28</sup> He was the only one left, and he had to go on paying the tribute; for the survivor is always a debtor. He thought he came back for fellowship with the living, while already he belonged to the fraternity of the dead.

We find, then, that this last attempt to explain and rationalize his motives is as true as his earlier ones, but not the final truth. The final truth is probably a pattern composed of all the threads we have picked up, and followed for a short while and dropped again. For the pattern is more than the sum total of the threads; it has its own symbolic design of which the threads know nothing. They are ordinary strings, twined of cause and effect; but in the completed design the effect seems to operate the cause. The threads are subject to causality; the pattern to finality.

### III

Perhaps I shall be accused of romanticizing. There are those who like their heroes as idols of clay, and those who like them cut into slices for examination under the microscope. The latter will be delighted and the former shocked by the publication of Hillary's letters; for those of his last period are terrifying to read. They are the letters of a very young man who knows that he is doomed, looking into a mirror:

'All day my eyes have pricked with tears, and now at last in the privacy of my room I have been weeping like a child for an hour. Why? Is it fear? I have not yet seen an aeroplane and I know not yet whether the night will terrify me or not. Is it just the atmosphere? Very largely I know. But perhaps this is what they mean in the Air Force by "lack of moral fibre." I have often wondered. Maybe this is what happens when a man's nerve goes. And yet I am not consciously frightened of anything, merely unutterably wretched. . . .'<sup>29</sup>

This wretchedness is due to purely physical reasons:

'. . . Being a rather selfish fellow, however, what is of far more interest to me is how to keep the extremely bitter cold not only from petrifying the burnt skin on my hands and face, but from prying its way into my very soul. . . . I suppose the atmosphere brought to the surface the subconscious dread of dying up here, at night and in the cold.'<sup>30</sup>

Of course he does not give himself away; nobody on the station can guess his agonies; he is a popular figure and they think him a ‘rather droll fellow’ as he stalks the aerodrome with his burnt face and hands, the constant, boyish pout on his grafted lips. There is the routine, the bull-shit, the dances, the average number of crashes; one might as well walk one’s calvary between Oxford Circus and Marble Arch.

These moods of complete despair alternate with moments of elation; with the elusive touch of those Circles of Peace travelling past in the air:

‘Much better today, for I have actually flown. . . . Were it not that one’s chattering teeth force one to walk on, it would be time well spent just to sit on the aerodrome and look out across the great stillness—for it is still; the roar of machines taking off and landing only seeming to emphasize it.

‘It’s curious psychologically that I have only to step into an aeroplane—that monstrous thing of iron and steel just watching for its chance to down me, and all fear goes. I am at peace again.’<sup>31</sup>

And there are other moments of a great weariness—almost amounting to a desire that it may be over, and over soon. Talking of a dance on the aerodrome, a week before his death:

‘I want to go to bed, but I stay on watching people getting drunk—talking of the “blacks” they put up the night before, etc. At 2.30 I am still there. Why? I don’t know. I’ve long ago got over that distressing emotion which should be confined to middle-aged women and very young boys—the fear of missing something—and yet I stayed.’<sup>32</sup>

The worst is that he has what the French Catholics call *la maladie du scrupule*; he despises himself for his ‘egotistical meanderings.’ ‘Forgive me this long and (yes, I believe it’s true) self-pitying epistle. Don’t be ashamed of me if you can help it’.<sup>33</sup> The fraternity of the dead has its peculiar etiquette; one has not only to live up to one’s form, one has to die up to it. But then again, there is the writer’s curiosity which forces him to feel his own pulse, to jot down on long rambling pages of pencil-scrawl the minutes of his agony; there are the nerve-tearing oscillations between cant and introspection, acceptance and revolt, arrogance and humility, twenty-three years and eternity:

‘K. has a theory for this. He believes there are two planes of existence,

which he calls the *vie tragique* and the *vie triviale*. Usually we move on the plane of the *vie triviale*, but occasionally in moments of elation, danger, etc., we find ourselves transferred to the plane of the *vie tragique*, with its un-common-sense cosmic perspective. One of the miseries of the human condition is that we can neither live permanently on the one nor on the other plane, but oscillate between the two. When we are on the trivial plane, the realities of the other are nonsense—overstrung nerves, etc. When we live on the tragic plane, the joys and sorrows of the other are shallow, frivolous, trifling. Some people try all their lives to make up their minds on which plane to live—unable to recognize that we are condemned to live alternatingly on both in a biological rhythm. But it happens that in exceptional circumstances—for instance if one has to live through a long stretch of time in physical danger, one is placed as it were on the intersection line of the two planes; a curious situation which is a kind of tight-rope walking on one's nerves. As few people can bear it for long, they elaborate conventions and formulæ—e.g. R.A.F. slang and understatement. In other words, they try to assimilate the tragic with the trivial plane. *Au fond*, he thinks, that is one of the main mechanisms of the evolution of civilisation: to petrify the violent and tragic into dignified conventional formulæ. I think he is right.<sup>34</sup>

Actually I still believe that this is true, as metaphors go. It is this jump from one plane to the other which transforms undergraduates into heroes, psychology into mythology, a thousand individually conditioned reflexes into the Battle of Britain. The mere passing of time has cumulatively a similar result—for the present is mainly on the trivial, history always on the tragic plane. Wars and catastrophes accelerate this process by producing what one might call the Pompeii-effect: schoolboys playing with marbles are caught by the lava and petrified into monuments.

But perhaps some will say that the lava romanticized the boys.

## IV

There is another type of person condemned to walk the tight-rope on the intersection-line of the two planes: the artist, particularly the writer. The pilot can only stand the strain by projecting the tragic on to the trivial plane. The artist proceeds the opposite way: he tries to see the trivial from the perspective of the tragic or absolute plane.

Does Hillary, as a writer, succeed in that? The promise is there, and the fulfillment, I believe, would have come. Among all the writing airmen, Hillary, with St. Exupéry, form a category a-

part. The others he compares to 'people who happened to be watching an accident with a camera in their hands and they got a good picture'; whereas he is the professional cameraman who always will get a good picture, even if there is no accident.

The professional touch in *The Last Enemy* is unmistakable. There is a dazzling facility of expression very rare in a first book. It has all the qualities of first-rate reportage—precision, vividity, brilliancy, economy, excitement. But for two chapters I would call it the best reportage that has come out of the war. And it is precisely these two chapters—'The world of Peter Pease' and 'I see they got you too'—which, through their failure, prove that he was more than a reporter. In these two chapters he tries to tackle the problem of ethical values *sub specie aeternitatis*, and here all facility and glibness suddenly leave him, the language becomes flat, the thought disarmingly naive. One feels that there is an overwhelming emotion which cuts his breath to helpless stammering:

'... I would write of these men, of Peter and of the others, I would write for them and would write with them. They would be at my side. And to whom would I address this book, to whom would I be speaking when I spoke of these men? And that too I knew. To Humanity, for Humanity must be the public of any book. Yes, that despised Humanity which I had scorned and ridiculed to Peter.'<sup>35</sup>

If one compares this with the accomplished virtuosity of the reportage chapters, one realizes where the promise lacks fulfillment. The violence of emotional perception, and the facility to report the factual, are basic qualities which make the writer; in *The Last Enemy* these two still lead a somewhat separated existence. But there are passages in the book, a good many of them, where they actually meet. There is, for instance, his recollection of the first fatal crash in the squadron:

'Of crashes. It was after an armament lecture in one of the huts when we heard, very high, the thin wailing scream of a plane coming down fast. The corporal sat down and rolled himself a cigarette. He took out the paper and made of it a neat trough with his forefinger, opened the tin of tobacco and sprinkled a little on to the paper, ran his tongue along the paper edge and then rolled it. As he put it in his mouth we heard the crash, maybe a mile away. The corporal lit a match and spoke: "I remember the last time

we had one of those. I was on the salvage party. It wasn't a pretty sight."

"We learned later that the man had been on a war-load height test and had presumably fainted. They did not find much of him, but we filled up the coffin with sand and gave him a grand funeral."<sup>86</sup>

There it is—the interlacing of the tragic and the trivial. We find it again in the puzzling effect of 'The beauty shop'—of that horror-cabinet of plastic surgery in the hospital, where noses grow from foreheads, grafted white lips are painted red with mercurochrome, grafted eyelids which have not taken are torn off again and thrown into the bucket. But all this is told with such a superbly grotesque twist that instead of being sick we chuckle and grin in blasphemous hilarity. How does he achieve this? It is the effect of walking on the intersection line; for what strikes us as grotesque is the reflection of the tragic in the distorting mirror of the trivial.

Passages like this are strewn all over the book; one meets them on every second or third page—memories of Oxford, a regatta in Germany, the first contact with a Spitfire, panic during a night-flight, the children of Tarfside, portraits of pilots, samples of R.A.F. atmosphere bottled on the aerodrome, crashes, death, drunkenness, operations and more operations, blindness, quarrels with nurses and philosophical talks. The two planes are not yet assimilated, but while moving on one, he keeps a feeler on the other plane. And that gives one confidence that, granted to live a few more years and write a few more books, the promise would have been fulfilled.

As it is, his place in literature can only be marked by a blank; and yet we can at least define with some probability the position of that blank on the map. With the 'bourgeois' novel getting more and more exhausted and insipid as the era which produced it draws to its close, a new type of writer seems to take over from the cultured middle-class humanist: airmen, revolutionaries, adventurers, men who live the dangerous life; with a new operative technique of observation, a curious alfresco introspection and an even more curious trend of contemplation, even mysticism, born in the dead centre of the hurricane. St. Exupéry, Silone, Tra-

ven, Hemingway, Malraux, Scholochow, Istrati may be the for-runners; and Hillary might have become one of them. But one slim volume, a packet of letters, two short stories are all that is left; and that is not enough to fill in the blank.

Thomas Mann says somewhere that to leave a trace behind him a writer must produce not only quality but bulk; the sheer bulk of the *oeuvre* helps its impact on us. It is a melancholy truth; and yet this slim volume of Hillary's seems to have a specific weight which makes it sink into the depth of one's memory, while tons of printed bulk drift as flotsam on its surface.

## V

We started from the question: What makes this young author-pilot's life and death into a symbol? and have not answered it. For the question what ideas or values he represents must finally merge into that of the ideas and values latent in his generation and class. This is what he has to say about them:

'The seed of self-destruction among the more intellectual members of the University was even more evident. Despising the middle-class society to which they owed their education and position, they attacked it, not with vigour but with adolescent petulance. They were encouraged in this by their literary idols, by their unquestioning allegiance to Auden, Isherwood, Spender, and Day Lewis. With them they affected a dilettante political leaning to the left. Thus, while refusing to be confined by the limited outlook of their own class, they were regarded with suspicion by the practical exponents of labour as bourgeois, idealistic, pink in their politics and pale-gray in their effectiveness. They balanced precariously and with irritability between a despised world they had come out of and a despising world they couldn't get into. . . .'<sup>37</sup>

This is how he saw his background; but we get a curiously different impression of the atmosphere and of himself in a letter of condolence from the Vice-President of Trinity to Hillary's father:

'... Then Dick arrived with his great charm and great personality, and at the end of his first year he had achieved a feat which will go down to posterity . . . for he was the stroke of an VIII which was the best College VIII that has ever been seen, and which, in making five bumps to go to the head of the river . . . achieved a feat which is never likely to be eclipsed. In 1939 again, his indomitable spirit and skill kept us in the position which his leadership had won for us the year before. Then came this cruel war....'

This, I suppose, is what one might call a counterpoint; but without it there would be no fugue. Auden and the five bumps complete each other in a singular way; without the bumps no Battle of Britain, without Auden no *The Last Enemy*. The very violence with which these youngsters reacted against their tradition proves how strong its hold on them still was. But tradition might act on a man in two ways: either as a sterilizing, or as a catalysing agent. With the majority the first is the case; Hillary belonged to that lucky minority to whom Shrewsbury plus Oxford becomes not a liability but a basic asset. This is how, in a few remarkably measured lines, he sums up what Oxford did to him:

'As it was, I read fairly widely, and, more important, learned a certain *savoir faire*, learned how much I could drink, how not to be gauche with women, how to talk to people without being aggressive or embarrassed, and gained a measure of confidence which would have been impossible for me under any other form of education.'<sup>38</sup>

And then, without transition, in between two bumps on the river—Pompeii. He was just learning 'a certain *savoir faire*', when:

'... Here in a clearing of the woods in Devon, I heard of the last flight of Richard Hillary. I sat in a stillness of the spirit and watched great hawks wheeling in the wind, poised to strike then suddenly swooping down upon their prey. So had he manoevred his Spitfire, fearlessly braving elemental dangers and man-made devilries to keep us, and England, safe.'<sup>39</sup>

Another counterpoint. Our highbrow-hawk pulls a face—for in his own eyes it looked like this:

'... This then was the Oxford Generation which on September 3, 1939, went to war.... We were disillusioned and spoiled. The press referred to us as the Lost Generation and we were not displeased. Superficially we were selfish and egocentric without any Holy Grail in which we could lose ourselves. The war provided it, and in a delightfully palatable form. It demanded no heroics, but gave us the opportunity to demonstrate in action our dislike of organized emotion and patriotism, the opportunity to prove to ourselves and to the world that our effete veneer was not as deep as our dislike of interference, the opportunity to prove that, undisciplined though we might be, we were a match for Hitler's dogma-fed youth.'<sup>40</sup>

What meticulous efforts to keep a clean head and dodge *la gloire*! There are those who die with their boots clean, and those

who die with their minds clean. For the former it is easier—their life and death is ruled by exclamation marks. For the Hillarys it is harder; their curriculum is punctuated by question-marks which they have to unbend, straighten, point all by themselves.

But the aim at which they point we can only guess. We can guess it, not from his formulations and ratiocinations, but from those parts in his writings where he is un-selfconscious and inarticulate. ‘In an age when to love one’s country is vulgar, to love God archaic, and to love mankind sentimental, you do all three,’ he says to Peter Pease—to the same Peter whom he admires most of all his friends, whose death he sees in a vision under the anaesthetic and whose memory becomes a cult and an obsession for him. And through that one sentence with its three disparaging adjectives, we get a glimpse into the concealed nostalgia, the *mal du siècle* of those who die with their minds clean.

For, in spite of all intellectual camouflage and nimbleness of formulation, one does not let one’s body go up in flames thrice out of sheer ‘dislike of organized emotion and patriotism.’ It sounds all very well, and it is not true. But one does it—perhaps, if one is exceptionally sensitive and exceptionally brave, and if one caught the bug of the great nostalgia of one’s time—in search of a redeeming emotion; of a credo, neither sentimental, vulgar nor archaic, whose words one could say without embarrassment or shame. When all isms become meaningless and the world an alley of crooked query-marks, then indeed a man’s longing for the Holy Grail may become so strong that he flies like a moth into the flame; and having burned his wings, crawls back into it again. But this, of course, is the one instinct in man’s condition which he can’t rationalize.

Richard Hillary was burnt thrice. After the first time they brought him back and patched him up and made him a new face. It was wasted, for the second time his body was charred to coal. But to make quite sure that the pattern be fulfilled it was his wish to be cremated; so they burned him a third time, on the twelfth of January, 1943, in Golders Green; and the coal became ashes and the ashes were scattered into the sea.

There the man ends and the myth begins. It is the myth of the Lost Generation—sceptic crusaders, knights of effete veneer, sick with the nostalgia of something to fight for, which as yet is not. It is the myth of the crusade without a cross, and of desperate crusaders in search of a cross. What creed they will adopt, Christ's or Barrabas', remains to be seen.

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#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> To 'X'. 1/3/42.  
<sup>2</sup> To 'X'. 1/12/42.  
<sup>3</sup> i.e., back to flying two years after his first crash.  
<sup>4</sup> To A. K. 2/12/42.  
<sup>5</sup> To A. K. 3/12/42.  
<sup>6</sup> To 'X'. 25/11/42.  
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>8</sup> '... I know that my instinct is right about this thing and you have never questioned my decision. Bless you for that.' (To 'X'. 19/11/42.)  
<sup>9</sup> To L. D., Autumn 1941.  
<sup>10</sup> To 'X'. 19/4/42.  
<sup>11</sup> To 'X'. 5/6/42.  
<sup>12</sup> Cf. letter to 'X'. 1/12/42.  
<sup>13</sup> Cf. letter to 'X'. 30/12/42.  
<sup>14</sup> To 'X'. 30/12/42.  
<sup>15</sup> Cf. letter to 'X'. 3/1/43.  
<sup>16</sup> Cf. letter to 'X'. 3/1/43.  
<sup>17</sup> Cf. letter to 'X'. 7/3/43.  
<sup>18</sup> To 'X'. 12/2/42.  
<sup>19</sup> *The Last Enemy*, p. 206.  
<sup>20</sup> To 'X'. 6/10/42.  
<sup>21</sup> To 'X'. 26/1/42.  
<sup>22</sup> To 'X'. 25/11/42.  
<sup>23</sup> To A. K. 3/12/42.  
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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>26</sup> To 'X'. 3/12/42.  
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<sup>28</sup> *The Last Enemy*, p. 220.  
<sup>29</sup> To 'X'. 25/11/42.  
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<sup>31</sup> To 'X'. 1/12/42.  
<sup>32</sup> To 'X'. 30/12/42.  
<sup>33</sup> To 'X'. 25/11/42.  
<sup>34</sup> To 'X'. 10/12/42.  
<sup>35</sup> *The Last Enemy*, p. 221.  
<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.  
<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.  
<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.  
<sup>39</sup> From an appreciation (unpublished), by Lady Fortescue.  
<sup>40</sup> *The Last Enemy*, pp. 28-29.

# In Memoriam: R. H. P., 1907-1944

by Jacques Barzun



**D**EATH cut off abruptly and too soon, in June last, the remarkable life and many-sided achievements of Robert Pitney. Born of a family distinguished for social standing and solid attainments, Pitney made himself at an early age that rarest of beings, a patron of the arts thoroughly conversant with the object of his patronage—and conversant, not merely as an appreciator and critic, but as a practicing artist in poetry and music, whose unique kind of mastery was entirely divorced from the search for distinction and applause. If any man lived with art and for it, yet free from all preciosity or pride, it was Robert Pitney.

Known to a wide acquaintance as an epicure and a host, Pitney made a still deeper mark on a smaller circle of friends with whom he played music, discussed poetry or the ballet, argued architecture, visited galleries, or matched puns while puzzling out with inexhaustible imagination and knowledge the cryptograms in *Finnegans Wake*. Although he seemed at all times ready for sociability, and thus deceived some into thinking that he was simply a representative young man about town, Pitney was the most indefatigable and thorough of students. In his presence the complacent connoisseur might well feel transcended at all points, for Pitney had read, seen, heard and reflected on all that attracted the attention of alert and catholic minds.

But unlike many even among these, he did not use art as a refuge from strong feelings or from the chaos of contemporary life. The riches of modern art gave him back in a variety of or-

dered ways the data of the twentieth century, to which he pretended no indifference. What he was indifferent to was the shifting wind of accepted or fashionable opinion, for the objects that this opinion plays upon he knew virtually as a craftsman. After midnight, his guests having retired, he might be found reading the score of a Mahler Symphony and ready to discuss with you the excellence of its orchestration or the feebleness of its rhythm; and he would manage to persuade you that its *longueurs* were not fatal, since art can vivify even the arid stretches that lead to it.

Still, it should not be supposed that Pitney's life was bounded by Voisin's and Carnegie Hall, Maxime's and the Orangerie. He had taught music at Avon School, contributed critical notes to *Hound and Horn*, and had tried out the concert stage as well as the podium, though more for reasons of friendship than of ambition. An invincible modesty—not shyness—held him back. With the standard of the creators before him, he felt that everyone else was better equipped than he. This was doubtless the reason that kept him from publishing any of his poetry; yet he was artist enough to feel the desire to communicate, and he privately printed three small volumes, from which the poems that follow have been chosen.

The bulk of his writing in this form betrays his dominant interests. His longer poems are almost all patterned after musical compositions which he knew intimately enough to interpret in two kinds of sound. This imparts to the written pieces a peculiar secrecy not wholly conducive to independence of effect. The shorter poems deal with places, books, or pictures, translated into equivalent sensations and treated as reminders of the human tragedy. The yearning for death and the futile snatching of either love or artistic emotion are the most vivid feelings that Pitney embodied, sometimes dramatically, as in *Calamity*, sometimes as sardonic fancy (in one sonnet he kaleidoscopes visions of himself shot, hanged, gassed and “pale as pork”), sometimes symbolically as in the fantasia on Melville, for whom he felt a special affinity.

The early pieces are visibly influenced by Joyce, Eliot and Lawrence. Later his idiom became more personal and his allitera-

tive associations (of a kind not congenial to admirers of Hopkins) more and more significant. With the third volume, one comes suddenly to the edge of the abyss. What style, what thought lay ungarnered beyond it? An old enigma, for even the longest-lived poet dies too young. But in Pitney the loss is doubled and redoubled by all he was besides. The critic whom Lincoln Kirstein called "America's Balletomane No. 1" and whom Bernard Hagggin respected as a peer; the musician and good companion whom an active circle counted upon for an annual music party at Cummington; the collector of books and prints and music; the generous host and gay conversationalist; the handsome massive figure topped by the great head, once painted by Tchelitchev, but better likened (by Pitney's own mother) to the most ancient and civilized of Pharaohs—the full reality of Robert Pitney only an unflagging imagination equal to his could recollect and hold captive in sober memory.

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## Three Poems by Robert Pitney

### CALAMITY

*From "POEMS 1907-1935"*

When the homecoming hands unlock a door,  
Break the huge bubble of silence in the room,  
Fling books on table, hat and coat on chair,  
Shatter the overlapping plumes of air,

When from the mantelpiece the fatal words  
Rush out to meet the brain midway in course,  
Then in the jangled struts of brain's clock tower  
The cold bell sounds the doom of happy hours.

The black words from the yellow square shout Dead,  
Sick—dying—cannot meet you—buried.  
The present visual token tongueless tells  
How sightless threads attach to distant ills,

Speaking of other rooms where people crawl  
Vomiting, turn their faces to a wall,  
Or writhe on couch with interlocking mouths  
Lest the embracing sheet become their shroud.

The unnumbered hours of agony can yield  
No woven crown, nor death on honor's field.  
Itself the sole excuse, the grief to come  
Hides the like future in the moment's womb.

Weave from these fragments winding sheets till thought  
Forgets the fencing of its ritual route.  
No deathblow nor no silver struck from skull  
Equal the pain that Time can never dull.

## VOYAGE AUTOOUR DE MA CHAMBRE

A MAP OF REALITY

*From "POEMS 1935-1938"*

A map or chart conveys the mind away  
To wander tortuous paths of red or blue  
Through foundered villages, forgotten vales  
With spires thrusting from clumps of darkest green  
And elms push their parabolas between  
The calm white houses squared along the street.  
Come, we must beat the boundaries of the brain,  
Those humid hills like mountains of the moon,  
Explore the avenues of peace or pain  
Between crevasses spongy, vast and grey.  
And here a signpost points the paths that lead

To winter's bony woods, bright summer fields,  
To night or day, to sun or snow or rain,  
Rivers of recollection, swamps of hate,  
Peaks of desire, savannahs of content,  
Abysses of despair, forests of fear.  
Above, the actual spreads its separate plane  
Closing another alley of escape.  
And in the tiny world where man can feel  
And postulate existence to be real,  
Smoke lifts from chimneys, boughs bend in the breeze,  
By a doorstep a man teases a dog,  
The hawks above the terrace mew and wheel,  
By a brook lie a couple locked in love,  
The axe bites yellow through black boles of trees,  
A dog barks in the valley and a train  
Dissolves its plumage into lilac veils.  
The children scream at play, the stallion neighs  
And in the orchard pears fall from the boughs.  
All this lies in the mind, the countryside  
(The houses, people, meadows, trees and roads  
Spread like a skin upon the contoured head,  
Hummock fitting on hummock, dale on dale,  
Grass in the hollows, trees upon the hills)  
Floating its green upon the uncolored brain  
Where print fuses its black and white to grey.  
Loosen with inward knife the skin and hair  
Folding it back like opening of a page,  
Lift but a corner of the map and peel  
(Finger and thumb) this country from the skull,  
Disclose, beneath the ventricles' mad beat,  
The slime that lingers, darkness that congeals,  
And in the centre where the charted real  
Of the external world can never reach,  
The whirlpool focuses and concentrates  
Upon the endless funnel and abyss  
Racing with all its rings of steel-black glass,

Sucking away the substance and the slime,  
Draining vitality to vacant stare,  
Leaving only the wrackless beach of time  
Devoid of flotsam, shell and fertile rain,  
Leaving the black of universal prime,  
Leaving only despair despair despair.

## NAUSHON

*From "POEMS 1939-1941"*

Along the liquid leash of islands  
The slumbering bourdon laps the beach  
Where sea breaks on the web of silence  
Breathing like peaceful beasts in sleep.

By shallow shore stir lifting shrubs  
Bay by the bay burns its perfume  
Wind hovers in the vales it loves  
Lingering in yellow locks of broom.

Contentment whispers in the waves  
And combs the wander-weeded coast  
Murmuring with languid lips of love  
The vows the living cannot loose.

# Compassionata at Hyde Park Corner

by *Sybille Bedford*



THE TRAFFIC, at last, was thinning. "Thank God," Osbert Norton said as gradually, in fits and starts, they drove through Piccadilly.

"What? Yes," Mrs. DeLancey's attention had been divided between Osbert, and Fortnum's windows.

A couple of taxis turned off into Duke Street, more were absorbed into St. James's; at the Ritz, Osbert changed into top gear. "Au large," he said, accelerating as they passed through the mouth of Piccadilly.

"How I hate open spaces," Mrs. DeLancey was looking about her.

"Agoraphobia?" Osbert laid his hand on Mrs. DeLancey's arm. The gesture was very deliberate. Touching his partner's hand was his conversational equivalent of italics. "Agoraphobia, *en plein Londres*? In the mountains, if you like—that desperate white wilderness . . . but here?"

"Exactly. Here. I mind architectural implications of space. A cupola seems always higher than the sky. You're able to take in the vastness all at once, in nature you are limited to a fraction of it. It is precisely because you *can* see the other end, that the Place de la Concorde is so endless and crossing it such an ordeal. Decidedly," she insisted, "it's the finite spaces I'm afraid of, even if they are re-assuringly noisy."

Arrested by a traffic light, their car had stopped once more. They were waiting mid-way between Hyde Park on their right and Constitution Hill on their left. A row of cars had drawn up

beside them; there was a general roaring and rattling of engines.

"Do you realize that, after all, London was a good deal noisier seventy years ago?" Osbert asked. "All those horse carriages, and no rubber tyres. There must have been a continuous clatter of hoofs and wheels in the streets. What with horns abolished and engines getting more and more noiseless, London may soon reach the quietest time in its history."

"The Silent Age, instead of the Golden? With aeroplanes becoming soundless too, we may soon find the silence a little oppressive."

"Oh, don't talk about aeroplanes," taking his feet off clutch and brake, Osbert stretched himself in his seat; "it isn't the moment." Not yet, anyway, he thought—if lunch was a meal of anti-climax, the abatement had not set in. He loved to make something of lunch, that floating caesura of the day. And today—they had spent an hour at Agnew's and two at Curtis's—the pause had been all it promised. Old Kitty DeLancey was really rather good company. But then, the more agreeable the break, the more delightfully marked the caesura, the greater the danger that it would widen into a gap engulfing the rest of the day. A meal with a vengeance. First of all, one drank too much—past claret was apt to make itself hated. And then after the claret, the company, the talk, one suddenly found oneself alone, keyed up to no purpose, keyed up in a vacuum. Three o'clock, with the company gone and the wine repented, could be a very hollow hour. "Are you at all afraid of hollow hours?" he addressed Mrs. DeLancey.

"About as much as you are of aeroplanes. Don't let's talk about hollow hours."

"My planes are really the more formidable," he said reflectively, "they're able to annihilate the hollow hours, the hollow as well as the full and intense ones."

"They're more likely to begin by annihilating this," Mrs. DeLancey looked at the Park and its columned gateway.

"While we get away by crouching in some nasty little hole? It should be the other way round, really—it takes such endless time to get anything like decent architecture."

"I should have thought not anything like as long as decent humanity, my dear Osbert. After all, there were periods when, architecturally, civilization was flawless; but the Palladian villas and Versailles synchronized with the Counter Reformation and the command performance of the torturing of Damiens."

"Ah, as to that, my dear," Osbert raised a hand, "as to that . . ."

"And anyway, what kind of civilization produced this?" she pointed at the Ionic columns at the Park entrance.

"A rather heterogeneous one. And that's what you wanted me to say?" Osbert laughed; he liked to be heard conceding a point. "Indeed all this copying of the right as well as of the wrong things. Not that this isn't very nice, the gate with the light and trees behind it: an effect of pleasant classicality. Good for the Victorian eclectics. But when you come to their Gothic choice. . . . Just think of the Houses of Parliament."

"I wonder to what extent bomber pilots are eclectics," Mrs. DeLancey muttered under her breath.

"I like to think," Osbert went on firmly, "that the Victorians made such a decent job of their Greek imitations and such an abominable one of their Gothic ones, because the one are articles of export and the others are not. Export in time, I mean. It's a question of travelling light: fourth century architecture, compact, well-designed . . ."

"My dear, it sounds like the kitchen unit in those horrid little new houses," said Mrs. DeLancey.

"The fourth B.C. commodity with its basic simplicity travelled comparatively well, while the complex and spiritually unwieldy mediaeval article arrived spoilt at the nineteenth century."

Mrs. DeLancey had a vision of Strassbourg Cathedral, crated and in tissue paper, arriving stale and crumbly at the wedding. "The lights have changed," discreetly, she drew Osbert's attention to the fact. Less discreetly, some trucks hooted behind them.

"So they have." Osbert stalled his engine, and tried to start it again. Before the impatience at their backs had grown too threatening, he managed to drive on. "The Victorians, like the American Colonists," he continued, unperturbed, "were successful with

the Orders because they are so eminently copyable. If your choice is moderation, you may not go very far right, but at least you won't go very far wrong. But when it comes to copying exaltation, to reproducing, in cold blood, the products of fervour . . . Contortions *senza fuoco*. And it's not just a question of export from century to century but from country to country. Look at Italy."

Mrs. DeLancey mentally conjured up the Dome of Milan.

Turning to their right, they were joined by the traffic from Victoria, and advanced in jerks towards St. George's Hospital.

"We're in it again, all right," Mrs. DeLancey remarked.

"Gothic architecture was really extremely hysterical," Osbert was no longer interested in the traffic, "that frenzy of building higher and higher—piers taller than ever before, vaulting more daring, nearer my God to Thee! Nearer, nearer . . . and then, at Beauvais, crash, the whole thing collapsed. Served them right . . ." He became aware that Mrs. DeLancey had ceased to listen, and looked up.

With spidery agility, a small, thin woman in a mechanical Bath chair was propelling herself, by the aid of arm levers, through the intricacies of the closely packed traffic. She had passed Osbert's Armstrong Sidley and was now checked in her progress by a large van stopping in front of her. Wedged between cars and buses, she sat primly and quietly in her chair. Osbert dared not look. There was something pathetic in her obvious confidence that these monsters would not squash her; in her confidence not only in the monsters' goodwill, but in the monsters' dexterity. There was something pathetic, too, in the invalid's genteel attempt at smartness. She was wearing a peacock blue coat and a hat which anxiously strived to match it. Evidently, she had got her new spring hat in time. Physically and socially better favoured, Mrs. DeLancey was able to get away with black felt in mid-March.

As a child, Osbert had often dreaded that on turning a street corner or getting into a railway carriage, he might suddenly come upon a man with a wooden leg. Now, in his thirties, horror had

given place to compassion and an uncomfortable sense of his own intactness. It seemed indecent somehow to run up the stairs in front of the Halt. Not that the woman in the chair made a great display of her infirmity. She obviously belonged to a class whose members were not demonstrative even about their ailings. But for the inevitable Bath chair, she wore her paralysis very discreetly. For Osbert, however, exposure would have been superfluous, the genteel invalidhood was enough to release his sorrow and resentment. For he resented invalids; resented them for the censure their shortcomings seemed to pass on the rest of his feelings. They seemed to comment on his discrimination, his delicate distinctions; they seemed to mock the deliberate way in which he tried to handle his life, his love of words, his knowledge of women's hats. Of course, he told himself, these reproaches were nothing but the stirrings of his own misguided conscience, for was the misery of some a reason for the rest to live badly, grossly, or beneath their lights? Sensibility was not, or only to a limited extent, a privilege of health or money, it was a privilege of the mind. Would it be anything but gratuitous masochism, self-propitiatory sacrifice, to burn his books for the sake of that poor woman in front of his car? Nevertheless, he did not feel at ease. He did not wish to speak. Perhaps his present silence, like the three minutes on Armistice Day, was a symbolic renunciation of talk.

Yet why should he be so affected, Osbert asked himself; goodness knows what *he* had been through—but going through meant getting over; his pains, thank God, had been remediable. Whereas to be born physically deficient was like being born, according to the Jansenists, spiritually deficient, without grace. In their respective worlds, both births predestined one to certain damnation.

"I hope she's at least religious," Mrs. DeLancey had obviously arrived at the same point. "What else is there for her?"

"What indeed," Osbert murmured.

"Isn't it too too awful," Mrs. DeLancey said with conviction. In a way, Osbert was glad that she had called the piteous spade

a spade. All the same he hoped that old Kitty was not going to wax too glib about it.

"She's obviously not well off, she wouldn't be whisking about in that horrid chair if she were," Mrs. DeLancey continued, "she ought to be, though! Why isn't there a government fund or something." A car, good rugs, a chauffeur to put them over her knees, friends and relations at her beck and call, cruises to the South, these would have been compensations. "She doesn't look as though she had developed a taste for the introspective life either."

Indeed, Osbert thought, the woman did not strike one as a very Proustian invalid.

"At least a man can always get married, whatever he may be lacking," inexorably Mrs. DeLancey went on draining the cup of possibilities, "but a woman with a limb short . . ."

Osbert was staring straight ahead, he did not wish to see the Bath chair and its occupant. However, it was still right in front of his car; for the last five minutes, they had all been moving much in the way of those processions which, by advancing three steps and retreating two, hope to obtain rain for the inhabitants of Catholic countries. "Sometimes I wish," he said, "that one could switch off one's imagination like the electric light."

Mrs. DeLancey evidently had no wish to do so. "There are exceptions, you know—think of that tart with one leg who used to be propped up outside the Dôme, they say she made a fortune. Retired on it, what's more. But you're right," she added abruptly, "too much imagination is a nuisance."

For an instant, imagination had linked the genteel English invalid with Montparnasse. It was decidedly irreverent. How indelicate mentally to put people into situations they would never dream of entering in the flesh. With the ill and bereaved, the indelicacy became almost impious. Grief segregated them. Addressing them, one spoke in mental whispers, a sordine was clipped, as it were, over their relations with the world. Mrs. DeLancey, like most people, had passed through the glass bell of segregation. For the time being, it had seemed restful enough. But what if one

were to remain—forever awe-inspiring, slightly unfamiliar to one's friends—under the glass bell? For ever addressed, like dogs and small children, in the artificial language of embarrassment? Mrs. DeLancey wondered what had originally segregated their particular invalid? Was the lesion of her spinal cord due to tuberculosis, perhaps, or a fall? Had the paralysis set in when she was still a child, or in later life? And which was worse: never to have known physical freedom, or to keep within one's loss the memory of having once strolled, run and danced? Mrs. DeLancey wished that she had seen the woman's face. She had hardly had a glimpse of it when the invalid first wheeled herself past their car. "Do you think she's got a driving mirror on her chair?" she asked Osbert.

"I don't know," he said tensely. The astonishing thing about it all, he was thinking, was that she had not committed suicide, that hundreds and hundreds of human wretches had not committed suicide. And yet they must be thinking of it; perhaps it was only this thought, this knowledge of obtainable death that kept them alive. A safe reserve of death, somewhere in a cupboard, a drawer; death in a small box, a glass tube, death on a prescription. They lived on death, the death they never took. Was there no other way then? No compensation? No cure? Surely there was medicine, there was science. And above all compassion, compassion to give the impetus. . . . Osbert's desire to act, to help, to sacrifice himself, became almost tangible, an overwhelming presence. Turning into Knightsbridge, he gave his wheel a savage tap. The misery of it all, the senselessness. . . .

He was aware of a general change even before he realized the dull shock against the front of his car. There was a commotion, drivers jammed their brakes, cars stopped, someone was screaming; he heard Mrs. DeLancey say faintly, "Oh Osbert."

Then it was as if a film were suddenly torn—in the surging darkness, movement and light were alive only as memories of a distant and Elysian state. It was perhaps for these memories that Osbert found it so hard to submit to the fact that he had run her over.

## II. Paul Claudel

*by Henri Peyre*

Translated by Harvey Buchanan



*Note:* This is the second article in a series on important European writers who are less well known here than they deserve to be. This article, translated and abridged for the *Chimera*, appeared originally in French in Mr. Peyre's *Hommes et Oeuvres du Vingtième Siècle*, 1938.

**N**O FRENCH WRITER today is in as paradoxical a situation as Paul Claudel. A man of over seventy years, he has conserved a marvelous youth and a combative and eager temperament which terrifies both the academicians and the lazy and timorous middle-class public. Adored by some, he is attacked without mercy by others; yet, by means of a fierce and—if one can apply such an adjective to the most Catholic of writers—diabolic obstinacy, he has, by accentuating certain of his whims and by holding to strong opinions, disconcerted a quickly frightened and not too perspicacious public. His works seem on occasion to miscarry voluntarily, and expose themselves to a justifiable ridicule. However, Claudel remains one of the very great French writers of this century, and without doubt it is he, more than any other, who most assuredly gives the impression of genius.

His case offers one of the most striking examples of the eternal incomprehension of contemporaries concerning their great men. Not that Claudel is unknown; rather, he is so well recognized and accepted as a force, that one neglects to discuss and read him. But his admirers, like his detractors, agree in seeing in him an

imaginative, brutal, and dishevelled genius, and a primitive, or a pseudo-primitive, with the style of an exuberant Christian Aeschylus.

So a Claudelian enigma has been formed. The public learns of a poet with a sublime and flashing imagination, a forceful and obscure lyricism, and a burning mysticism, who is at the same time the most peaceful of fathers, the most pious of Catholics, and the most lucid of ambassadors. And the public, which loves neat solutions and convenient labels, decides that such a man, at once so clear in his diplomatic reports and so obscure in his literary works, is making fun of them.

Now there are in Claudel several personalities: a great Catholic repudiated or unknown by many Catholics, and suspected by others of revolutionary romanticism while he has in fact despised romanticism; a great lyric poet, large and vibrant in inspiration, whose greatness remains unrecognized by many; the best but most rarely played of contemporary French dramatists; the vastest of intelligences; the sharpest of critical minds, although denied by the tribes of professors and professional critics; an ambassador of France and a great humanist who is rejected by the most jealous guardians of French tradition.

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A few brief remarks will suffice to supply the little information needed to evaluate his work justly. By origin, this man to whom a narrow criticism refused those "eminently French" qualities of clarity and reasonable moderation, belongs to the confines of the Ile-de-France and of Champagne, to the country of Racine, La Fontaine, and of the great cathedrals we call Gothic. A substantial man, with large shoulders, an earthly gait, and immobile features, he makes one think of a descendant of a race of peasants, rather than of the mystic or the contemplative and ethereal poet that certain of his readers expect to find.

His birth date—1868—makes him a contemporary of Benda, Daudet, Maurras, Francis Jammes, and almost of Gide and Valéry. Paul Claudel, like many other men of genius, was an excel-

lent student, and in 1883 his success was rewarded when Renan distributed the prizes during exercises at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. The kiss that the dilettantish and smiling philosopher gave him upon that occasion came to burn later upon the young poet like a stigma. He determined to repudiate that "emasculating philosophy" and the teachings of a lay and joyless positivism.

On December twenty-fifth, 1886, the young man of nineteen had entered Notre Dame for the midnight mass. He was suddenly as though stricken to the earth by God, and henceforth, like Pascal, he had had his "night"; he believed. He had been chosen by God, marked with that sign which distinguishes the elect from the damned.

That sudden illumination dominates and explains Claudel's whole literary career. At the same time the young man immersed himself in Symbolist literature; he appeared at the "Tuesdays" of Mallarmé, became the friend of Gide and Valéry, and already was able, by the passion of his lyricism and the magnitude of his intelligence, to astonish a Marcel Schwob. Happily, his solid earthy nature, vigorously attached to the concrete, saved the young Claudel from the affected swoons, ethereal flights, and sublime transports of purity which distracted so many of the Symbolists. Happily also, the career of this poet, whom his contemporaries already declared the hope of his generation, was removed from the Parisian literary salons and their stultifying atmosphere.

Claudel, then, after passing his examination in Foreign Affairs with distinction, went to fill diverse consular posts in Boston, Hamburg, and above all, in China, where he lived fourteen years. The influence of the Far East upon him was both profound and durable. After being named Minister to Brazil, he became, after the war, French Ambassador in Tokio, then in Washington and Brussels. These long years spent outside his native country explain in part the strong originality of Claudel, the non-conformity of the poet-ambassador who remained in rebellion against the actions of the salons and academies, and at the age of seventy-five, or almost, is the youngest, in spirit, of living writers.

This bold and brilliant poet, a believer drunk with God, and a man inspired, is not only one of the most intelligent, but also one of the most cultivated and learned men of our day. Claudel seems to have reflected upon all subjects, explored all books: first the Bible, from the lyricism of the Prophets to the vision of the Apocalypse; then the Greeks and Romans—for this great Catholic is perhaps the most Greek of contemporary Frenchmen (Dionysian Greek, as Nietzsche would have said, if not an adept of Apollonian serenity). His translation of the *Oresteia* is one of the most Aeschylean that has ever been attempted.

In addition, Claudel has studied the Chinese theatre, Japanese poetry, and Indian art. He has spoken magnificently of Dante and Italian art; he has relived the Spain of Columbus and of the *Soulier de Satin*; he has lucidly analyzed Dutch painting. He is at home in English literature; but it was not toward the Elizabethans, toward Coleridge, toward Shelley, Swinburne, and Yeats, that is to say toward the purest, the most Nordic poets across the Channel that his taste led him, it was rather toward English-Catholic literature, more Latin and often closer to the French; and it was toward Blake, but also toward Keats, Tennyson, and Milton.

Finally, this universal spirit has been one of the sharpest observers of foreign nations in our day. Only the Parisian *badauds* and the superficial have been astonished at the reputation he has had at the Quai d'Orsay for clear and objective reports. The pages of Claudel on China, on Japan, on America, on architecture, on the cinema, and finally, on literature, rank among the wisest, the most methodical, the most penetrating, that our contemporary essayists have left us.

\* \* \*

Claudel is above all else a great Catholic poet, and in that respect possesses an uncommon originality in French literature, which, since the Renaissance, has numbered very few really Christian poets. The sensitivity of Baudelaire is without doubt Catho-

lic; and Verlaine knew the sin, remorse, and humility of a true believer. But Claudel is the only lyric poet in France and perhaps, since Bossuet, the only great writer whose work in its entirety can be explained only by a Catholic interpretation of the world.

I am here concerned with Claudel's religion only under the aspects which help explain his literary work, leaving aside the metaphysical tracts and the apologetics of the poet. This Claudelian faith is the faith of a convert. Claudel is of the race of the violent, of the St. Pauls, St. Augustines, and Pascals—of those who believe because of a sign, an individual revelation which one day made them instruments of God.

It is to his religious faith that Claudel owes that vast conception of the world which makes him the singer of the whole; the immense harmony of a universe, humble before its creator and ordered by His Providence. This poet-diplomat, whose career has carried him across every continent and led him to encounter the thousand differences and tenacious hatreds which separate so many people, insists upon praising the order of the world and the vast concert of which all beings and all things are part. It is in the literal and etymological sense of the adjective that Claudel is a catholic poet. As he has himself said of Dante, that other universal poet, the end of his poetry is the universe; he also plunges "au fond du défini pour y trouver de l'inépuisable."

\* \* \*

Claudel's lyricism is above all remarkable for the extent of its inspiration. Lyricism, the critics used to teach, means personal poetry, self-expression. That is no more true for Claudel than for Pindar, for Victor Hugo than for Verhaeren or Valéry. Claudel loves all creation; he does not seek the echo of his soul in the so-called inanimate objects, rather he cherishes them for themselves, with a direct, robust tenderness, almost pagan in his avidity to seize the concrete. A great breath of pure air moves through his poetic work. There are no longer the distorted logographs in

which the Symbolists delight. It is a vast cosmology, the perception of a peasant which seems to grasp at once the very secret of things, and to transform it into poetry.

But there is no pantheism in the Claudelian vision. God remains present in the Nature He has created. Nor is the poet passive or submissive before the spectacle of the world. He bounds with delight, he sees the universe anew, as fresh and as young as upon the day of its creation—and he embraces it in his vast vision.

Salut. . . . ô monde nouveau à mes yeux!  
O credo entier des choses visibles et invisibles;  
                je vous accepte avec un cœur catholique!  
Où que tourne la tête  
J'envisage l'immense octave de la Création!

\* \* \*

Such lyricism is, above all, impetuous, and carried by that immense movement of nature that it espouses and explains. In an epoch when, following Poe and his French admirers, his contemporaries no longer wished to admit into their narrow canon any excepting the short poem, the Verlainian song or the concise enigma of the Symbolists, Claudel returned, like Rimbaud, his master and intercessor, to great imaginative poetry, to the majestic amplitude of breath, little esteemed by the moderns who have such scant possession of it. One of the least generous traits of our contemporaries is a sophistical competence in setting up our impotencies and weaknesses as universal rules. Claudel refused to admit with them that poetry should never be more than a brief and fugitive flash, a transient emotion of our nerves, that the sonnet itself, in our era of speed, ought to yield place to the *Uta* of five lines and the *Hokku* of three. Nor does he neglect in his lyricism the vast harmonies, the deep effects upon our sensibilities, and that imaginative eloquence that was, in the Bible and in the ancient choruses as well as in Dante, Hugo, Shelley, the sign of all supreme poetry.

\* \* \*

The entire nineteenth century had been attracted to the theatre. From Byron to Swinburne, from Goethe to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, from Victor Hugo to Maeterlinck and Verhaeren, the lyric poets of every country attempted to write for the stage. There is little permanent achievement in these frantic efforts of lyricism to adapt itself to the exigencies of construction required by the stage and yet to retain its spontaneous spirit. Drama, even the quaking horror of *The Cenci* or the cold and pure success of *Iphigenie auf Tauris* becomes pale compared to the best poems of Shelley and Goethe.

Claudel, thanks to the strange power of his imagination, to the "cosmic" character of his genius, hears from on high the vast harmony of the world and contemplates human beings caught by the passions and vices which possess them, yet raised toward the supreme gift of self, the consoling effusion toward the God who judges and pardons them. Alone perhaps of all the lyric poets of the last two centuries, and alone among modern French writers, he was predestined for the theatre. He brought to the stage his taste for ensembles, for mass effects, which is the gift of his synthetic imagination, and the generous objectivity of the Christian poet who doesn't refuse his sympathy to the wicked, the criminal, or the disconcerting demoniacs in all their strangeness who people his dramatic works. The most perverse and the most infuriated are for Claudel only prodigals, miserable creatures to whom the harmonious order of the world has not been revealed, and who consequently disturb its music. They are not depicted with the excesses of sombre colors which make the criminals of Hugo and Shelley terrifying and childish monsters.

This sovereign objectivity of the Claudelian drama is accompanied by a scorn no less magnanimous for the ordinary conditions of the theatre. Never, even with Musset or Shakespeare, has there been such independence in the changes of time and place, as in, for example, the *Soulier de Satin*. The diplomat plays easily and gracefully with history; the profound connoisseur of foreign peoples and countries offers no concession to the tyranny of local color or realism. Claudelian heroes have neither nation-

ality nor profession. Their very names (Sygne, Ysé, Sichel, Thomas Pollock Nageoire, Cébès, Amalric, Mésa, and Anne—the last two are names of men) seem chosen by design, and often not without humor, in order to bewilder the reader. This twentieth-century theatre is the most completely detached from all realism, from all spatial and temporal peculiarity imaginable—and nevertheless, Claudel has not, like Maeterlinck, had recourse to ambitious symbols. The energetic simplifications loved by Claudel recall, moreover, that stylization of the statuary in the great cathedrals, their powerful effects of mass, their grandiose and almost peasant solidity, resting on the power of genius and faith.

Claudel has not always avoided the snares of an ideological theatre (in his *Ville*, for example), nor even of the obscurity of a tiring multiplicity of scenes to which the most favorably disposed reader must refuse his attention (in the *Repos du Septième Jour*, the *Pain dur* and even, in spite of the great beauties of detail, in *Tête d'Or* and the *Soulier de Satin*). On the other hand, when he succeeds in establishing contact with the ideal public he addresses, Claudel moves before it living persons, characterized by many precise details, often trivial, and who have none of those incarnate problems of Curel, Brioux, and Shaw. "Il n'est de création que du particulier," Claudel himself declared in his *Art poétique*. The style, in the metaphors and "respiratory" verses common to the author, is easily differentiated in each of his characters. Claudel particularly excels in transmitting, through their speech, the simple souls of the peasants, the virginal purity of young girls, and the lewd and brutal covetousness of the wicked and ambitious.

The supreme originality of Claudel as a dramatist is in the nature of the conflict which moves his chief characters. These dramas, by the relative sobriety of action and the unity of the agonizing problem for which one hopes a dénouement, are close to the classic French tragedy. They never develop, however, with the same precision; and the episodes and secondary characters multiply like divergent and thick branches of the tree which remains the symbol of the Claudelian theatre. The dramatic con-

tinuity is not supplied by plot, for Claudel's characters race through full lyric monologues and appear hardly to hear one another, to struggle against one another. The true conflict is not among them, it is in them.

Their real object is to attain God. And Claudel isn't anxious, like Mauriac, for instance, to plunge his heroes in the mire in order then to raise them in an impetuous flight toward faith. He is well acquainted with the obstacles that are encountered in their aspiration toward the divine. If in general he leads them to prayer, it is not after one of those jugglings with which every dramatist depicts the action of grace as a brusque and total conversion (even *Polyeucte* and Rotrou's *Saint Genest*). These are souls who, unsatisfied by the good things of the earth, find the faith for which they thirst in renouncement. Drama, with Claudel, remains profoundly human and at the same time fervently religious, because it depicts, with its violent and tormented heroes, the inner struggle which leads them to supreme revelation: to accept degradation in order to gain redemption; to renounce self, to humiliate the will and the avidity for too terrestrial nourishment in order to be reborn.

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Such is the writer who has been exposed to the jibes of the journalists, to the incomprehension of the sophisticated, to the jealousy of his literary colleagues, and who, at the age of sixty-five, was rejected by the French Academy! They accused him, for all time, of being an undisciplined genius, a victim of exuberance and excess, and a poet obstinate in his conscious obscurantism.

Claudel is denounced therefore as an apostle of literary disorder and as a barbarian loosed on traditional style and syntax. Our descendants will without doubt smile at our blindness; for no modern possesses a more complex, primitive style, a style closer in its richness to the Middle Ages—or even to the French seventeenth century. And his alleged disorder is only an occasional and pardonable affectation, and a desire to shock academic tradition.

In truth, even his most rapturous odes follow an inner order—an order which has none of that scholastic rigidity French people cherish so much, and which they hope to find even where it does not belong. Claudel has pointed out the two divergent aims of a writer: to be understood, and then one has recourse to prose, or to give pleasure, which is the task of poetry. The dramatist of *L'Annonce faite à Marie* and of *L'Otage*, the poet of the *Cantate à Trois Voix*, is the most architectonic genius of our epoch. His dramas scorn the exterior and scholastic composition which forbids surprise. But they are penetrated with a secret unity, suggested, rather than imposed from without, and with a subtle order which comes from apparent disorder: a phenomenon common to Shakespeare, Wagner, and even Calderón.

There is much of the classic in Claudel: an immense intelligence, a rare perspicacity, a wise distrust of the follies in which fashion and the desire to shine ceaselessly entice the best minds, and, finally, a judicious moderation. Such are the virtues, deceiving for those who would judge him by his conventional reputation, which appear in the critical pages of *Positions et Propositions*, in the rambling dialogues, humorous, personal, and ingenious, like those of a Gallic and Champenois Plato, of the *Conversations dans le Loir-et-Cher*.

Claudel's contribution to the celebrated literary controversy on pure poetry, started some years ago by Abbé Bremond, is an example of that calm and wise honesty that our most imaginative poet knew how to keep in the course of a debate which hit the Parisian public with an epidemic of unreason. Abandoning the adventurous speculations of the malicious Abbé on poetic fluidity and prayer-poetry, Claudel neatly showed that the rôle of intelligence in art is certainly limited, but indispensable. "Intelligence," bantered Claudel, "is no more the fundamental virtue for the poet than prudence is for the general or probity for the contractor. It is a secondary necessity." Instead of accumulating subtleties and citations borrowed from a thousand lay and sacred authorities, as the ecclesiastical academician amused himself in doing, Claudel treated the question as a methodical thinker, as a

lucid analyst of deliberately confused and juxtaposed notions. The work of art, he declared from the beginning, is "the result of a collaboration of imagination and desire." Inspiration is a complex state where all the faculties are raised to the supreme pitch of vigilance and attention. But taste is not absent, nor intelligence, which observes, chooses, separates, "divides and diffuses order, light, and proportion," so well that "from emotion comes, not obscurity, but a superior lucidity."

Such are the qualities which make Claudel one of the sovereign names in French literature today. There are, amid his enormous production, certain volumes one prefers to others. The war poems of Claudel do not stand up too well after thirty years. His farces, or satirical dramas, *Protée*, *L'Ours et la Lune* baffle many of his admirers. Several of his dramas and canticles suffer for having been conceived in too hasty a fever, and for not having been clothed in an accomplished, definitive form, which a genius more friendly to slow patience would have given them.

But can one wish that all be equally perfect in a work so voluminous? And, if the Claudelian concepts and metaphors are open to mockery, would it not be better, instead of mocking, to admire that which is undeniably beautiful? There is no more unjust and base error in all the criticism of our century than the incomprehension, among journalists and professors, of Claudel, the leading dramatist of our times, one of our rare lyric poets, and one of our most energizing intellects.

In a century when all over the world youth is the order of the day, one could not find a more worthy inspiration than this French poet, who saw that "youth is not the age of pleasure, but the age of heroism." Claudel has been able obstinately to preserve his faculty of enthusiasm, his ever alert sensitivity, his capacity for radiant illusion and fecund optimism, which are, in general, characteristics of the happiest and most tormented years of life. "La jeunesse," he declared in the *Soulier de Satin*, "est le temps des illusions, mais c'est parce qu'elle imaginait les choses infiniment moins belles et nombreuses qu'elles ne sont, et de cette déception nous sommes guéris avec l'âge."

His work is indeed the freshest in color, the most virile, and in our century, the most assured of survival. It is also one of the most laden with significance, most rich in thought and vision. It delights the reader, elevates him, awakens reflection in him, moves him, and thus answers the prayer of the poet:

Faites que je soit comme un semeur de solitude,  
et que celui qui entend ma parole  
Rentre chez lui inquiet et lourd.

## Lynx

by R. A. D. Ford



Consignee of silent storms and unseen lightning,  
soft violence, oppressor of new fallen snow,  
moving like the winter solstice through  
the beautiful woods, none so  
lovely even in eyes yellow in white  
fur the betrayer; the leap without  
muscle swelling, small cloud blotting  
out the bright day — Will not languish  
in the cruel trap, the cruel eyes  
and cruel claws wounded, the hunters shouting  
in victory, gloating at the anguish  
in the mighty legs broken—  
Will not linger broken but pass  
suddenly with great pain into the Indian night.

WALLACE FOWLIE: *Clowns and Angels*. Sheed & Ward.

## AN APPRECIATION

BY HENRY MILLER

I find it difficult not to become extravagant in appraising a work which deals so successfully with veritable oceans of literature. The ordinary critic would require volumes to say what Wallace Fowlie has registered in 150 pages, and even then we would still be at the periphery. Using the symbols of clown, angel and *voyou* with the subtlety and precision of the mathematician, Mr. Fowlie brings us with daring and alacrity to the very center of his theme, which is the soul. The effect upon the reader of this re-orientation in criticism is very much like having one's brain suddenly flooded with strong sunlight. Everything is seen in a positive light; if there is destruction it is annihilation—by light. There is no malice, no rancor, no jealousy, no envy in these pages. Neither is there judgment, unless it be the judgment accorded the dead on the last day. Once again, refreshingly and excitingly, we see the critic in his true role of appreciator. The book is a continuous assertion welling from a clear source, revindicating all that is pristine and functional in this medium.

I had never heard of Wallace Fowlie until I read his essay, *Narcissus*, in *View*. At once I felt that I had come in contact with a mind that was intact and a spirit that was pure. Since then I have read several of his books, and my interest in this author has grown. In fact, I might say that in this realm of criticism I am one of his most passionate admirers. In reading him I feel that I am being "instructed," using that word in the highest sense. This despite the fact that I am not a Catholic nor a member of any organized religion. It is Mr. Fowlie's special gift to remind us that the amplitude, the tolerance and the charity of the true catholic spirit are still alive.

This book deals with the imponderables in literature. When the author treats of such poets as Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Claudel he opens a vein of pure gold which he proceeds forthwith to inject directly into the blood stream. When he touches upon the subjects of evil, of grace, of the vice known as *acedia*, he re-awakens the sense of awe and mystery which nowadays only the physicist and astronomer seem capable of evoking. He has a flair for detecting, in the writers he treats of, not only what is eternal in their work but what is usable in every day life. Whoever is moved by these penetrating essays must act, even if it be to throw himself into the arms of the devil. The danger is not, as some may think, of being converted to Catholicism but of being faced with the soul's dilemma. "The failure of all this generation," he writes in the Notes, "is the failure to distinguish between good and evil."

There is something lofty, elegant and austere in the style Wallace Fowlie has made his own. Capable of tremendous absorption, condensation, sifting and synthesis, he imparts his profound erudition lightly. He is at home amidst the most antagonistic elements, directing his frail bark wth the skill of a born mariner. To taste the fruits of his ripe wisdom is sheer delectation. On almost every page there is a phrase, a sentence or a whole paragraph which makes one pause, reflect and dream. In *Clowns and Angels* he has given us a sort of breviary which is for winter, spring, summer and autumn reading, thoughts in season and out, but never stale, never commonplace. Limited as I am to but a few brief words

about his book, I find it exasperating not to be able to cite at least a dozen memorable passages.

One of the greatest services he renders the reader is to cause him to reread those authors whom he thought he knew well. Sometimes a simple phrase jolts one out of the habitual trance of facile acceptance (where celebrated authors are concerned) and forces one to ask himself if he ever really read the author in question. Or it may be that in dwelling on a certain note, in repeating it through all the octaves of his keyboard, there are brought to life again those buried moments, those intervals, so to speak, when in the reading of a great work we paused and fell into a meditation so profound that even the memory of what stirred us was lost, and only years later, catching the crystal overtone of such a moment, do we begin to live again in that book. There is this quality of reverberation in Mr. Fowlie's writing, and there is also the quality of reflection. From too great familiarity with the face of an author's work—and criticism today deals with hardly anything but the superficialities—we tend to lose the angle of vision which comes only with the dislocation caused by inner excitement. The facets of approach employed in these studies of eminent French writers are like so many shimmering planes in which are mirrored our deepest reflections whose transcendence is swift as lightning. By an oblique reference to a classic figure, an Ophelia, an Andromache, for example, the author succeeds in startling us as violently as the passage of a ghost across a window pane. In its train comes not only the drama which gave the figure being but also the sea of emotions which the discovery originally inspired. Again, what delight, what a thrill we experience when, dazzled by his sure and easy digestion of such a colossal output as that of Jules Romains', we find that he has also made room to say a few words about the dog Macaire.

Above all there is throughout the book the felicitous touch of the man who will never cease to seek and who sometimes, in the penumbra of his own radiance, does not hesitate to grope with trembling hands. His certitude is never arrogant or pedantic. Woven into his skill, his grace, his dexterity there is always the element of risk, of daring, known alike by the acrobat and the poet. His moments of suspense are those same moments known to the performer and the man of solitude—when he takes flight with his whole being and emerges from the experience a new man, a man dedicated to still greater flights of daring, whether in the air or in the mind.

EDITORS' NOTE: We regret that space does not allow the printing of other reviews in this issue.

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